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National Home Center News®

SECOND CLASS

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John Cotter, co-op founder, dead at 85

Leader in hardlines distribution for 40 years

By Gary S. Ruderman

EVANSTON, Ill. — In his lifetime, he was called a showman, a salesman, a role model and, occasionally, other less endearing terms.

But "legend" is how friends and business associates recall John Cotter, the founder and patriarch of Cotter & Co., who died from cancer Aug. 28.

Cotter had been hospitalized here on Aug. 7 for what was thought to be a chronic cold, but underwent surgery one week later. He had turned 85 on July 8.

It was Cotter's realization of his theory to provide low-cost distribution of hardlines, combined with a tenacious personality, that took his Chicago-based Cotter & Co. from a fledgling business selling $385,000 in products to 25 Midwestern stores in 1948 to its status as the world's largest dealer-owned wholesale co-op, with 1988 sales hitting $2 billion from 8,100 True Value and V&S Variety stores around the U.S. and in several foreign countries.

"No one of his generation has had a more positive influence on the dynamics and evolution of this business," said George Sherman, executive vice president for Black & Decker. "I knew him as a legend."

"We're going to miss him and the industry will miss him," lamented long-time friend Ed Lanctot, a Cotter friend for half a century, who was with Cotter when he started the co-op 40 years ago and retired as its general merchandise manager in December.

Tall, lanky, conservative, hardworking, Cotter molded the company to his own image. One of Cotter's mottos, according to dealers who knew him, was, "If you believe, you belong," and more than any other company in the home improvement industry, Cotter & Co. was said to have been run like an extended family.

Even after his "retirement" in 1983, Cotter continued to make the drive from his modest home in suburban Evanston to the office six days a week.

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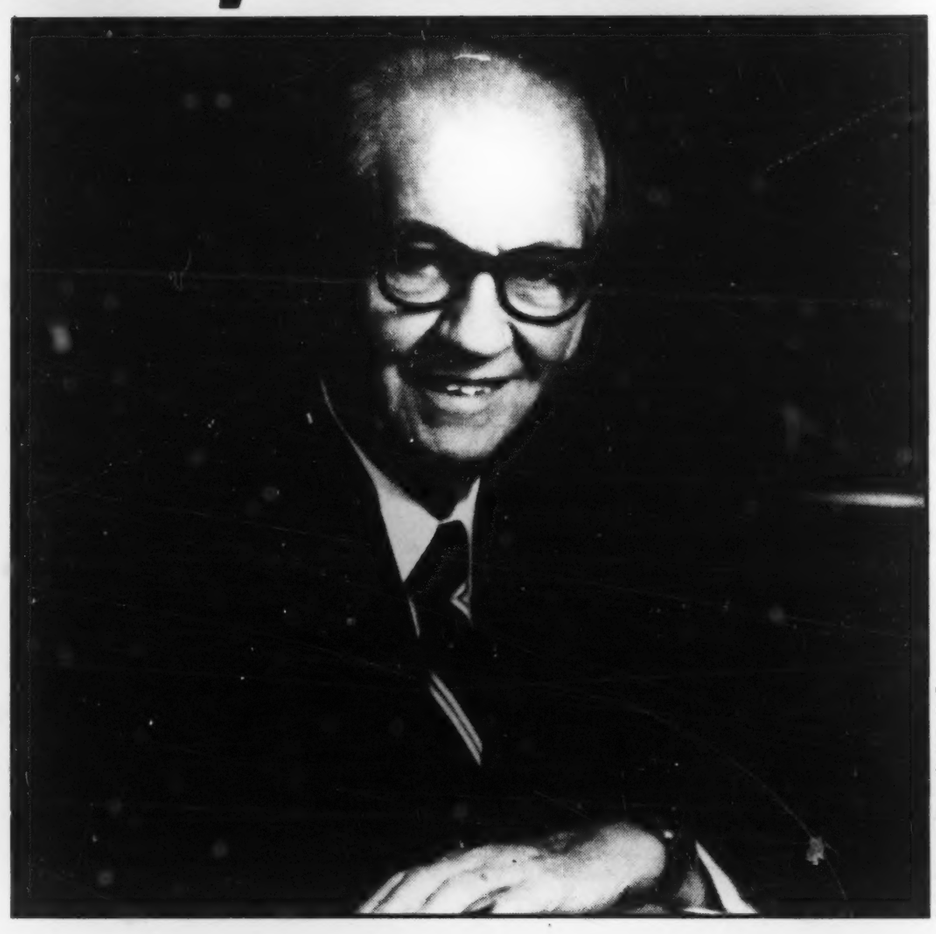

Photo courtesy Cotter & Co.

John Cotter

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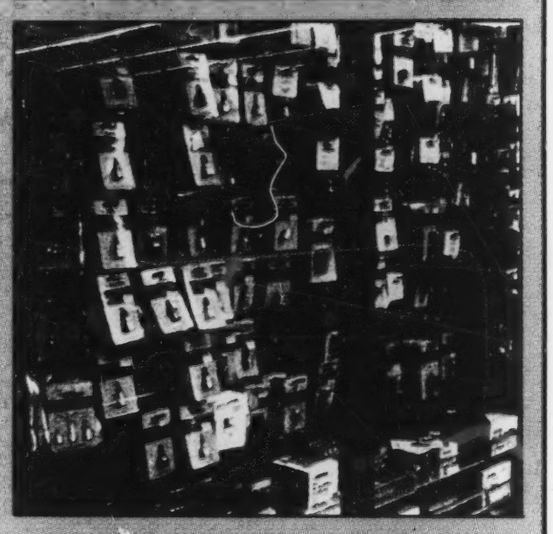

Accessories help dealers boost profit margins from power tool sales 39

Weyerhaeuser announces selloff of DCs

Wholesale distributor to be left with 43 units

By an NHCN staff editor

TACOMA, Wash. — Weyerhaeuser is selling 14 of its lumber and building materials distribution centers around the U.S., as part of its ongoing corporate restructuring.

The sale of the distribution centers, which is being handled by Chemical Bank Investment Banking in New York, should be completed by the end of the year.

Nationwide selloff

Based on information from several sources, *NHCN* believes Weyerhaeuser has put up for sale its distribution centers in Boston; Hartford, Conn.; Freehold, N.J.; Baltimore; Tampa and Orlando, Fla.; Asheville, N.C.; Grand Rapids, Mich.; Indianapolis; St. Louis; Houston and Los Angeles. The closure of distribution centers in Jacksonville and Miami, Fla., were announced June 1.

With a lack of Eastern mills, Weyerhaeuser has been reducing its presence in the eastern market, said one of its distribution center general managers notified of the proposed selloff.

A spokeswoman for Weyerhaeuser declined comment beyond quoting from an Aug. 18 Management Bulletin, in which company president John Creighton told managers the evaluation of the company's distribution division was complete. Creighton said an "implementation plan" would begin immediately.

Beginning Aug. 24, some distribution center general managers were notified of the selloff. They, in turn, notified larger retail customers and wholesalers Aug. 25.

The full extent of the proposed selloff on customer service

(Continued on page 92)

Pro Hardware to relocate headquarters to Denver

By an NHCN staff editor

CHICAGO — Pro Hardware, the wholesaler marketing group, will be moving quite a lot in the next year.

Gary Cosgrave, Pro's 47-year-old chairman and ceo, told a group of around 150 vendors at last month's Hardware Show that his organization would relocate its corporate headquarters from Stamford, Conn., to Denver by the end of October.

He and three other Pro executives also laid down the law that Pro would demand much stronger commitment to its expanded merchandising and marketing programs from its 43 distributor members, its 5,000 Pro-affiliated retailers and its vendors.

This includes what Cosgrave said would be "specific dollar commitments" from retailers, as well as an increase and standardization of Pro's store identification program.

Photo courtesy Pro Hardware

Gary Cosgrave

The company will also enforce closer adherence to its "policies" by its distributors, with each audited annually by an executive committee; will develop a retailer advisory board to select products and services; and will emphasize block purchases from vendors to improve the pricing and margin structure of the products being sold to its dealers.

Centralized marketing

The marketing group, whose members sell to an estimated 19,000 dealers, had sales of $725 million last year. With its 1989 merger with two other wholesaler marketing groups—Allied Hardware Services in Chicago and Handy Hardware Wholesale in Houston—as well as its signing as members Nuway Distributors, CC Distributors and Galbraith Steel, Pro Hardware expects sales of its membership to surpass $1 billion this year.

Cosgrave said Pro's marketing ef-

(Continued on page 94)

Abitibi-Price puts building materials div. on the block

By an NHCN staff editor

TROY, Mich. — The intent of Abitibi-Price Inc., the Toronto-based paper manufacturer, to sell its building materials division here caused surprisingly little concern or speculation among home improvement distributors and dealers that buy from it.

"I see that as a trend in the industry," said John Beers, lumber department manager at Progressive Affiliated Lumbermen (PAL), the commodities co-op based in Grand Rapids, Mich. "Companies will be deciding what businesses they want to be in in the future. It's not a shock to me."

A resolve to concentrate primarily on its core businesses—producing newsprint and other paper products—prompted Abitibi's parent to place the division on the block, according to Anne Johnston Hall, manager of corporate information at Abitibi.

Hall cited market share as the reason for the proposed sale, which was announced on Aug. 22. "We intend to stay in businesses where we can be the best and then [grow] to be the biggest," Hall said. "We don't see ourselves being the biggest [in building materials]."

The cyclical nature of the building products division also was a concern to the company, Hall added.

Strong image, falling sales

The division, which employs 1,600, manufactures hardboard paneling and siding products, plastic mouldings, and bifold doors, shutters and shelving at facilities across the U.S in Michigan, Ohio, Kansas, North Carolina (two) and Indiana.

The consensus among retailers contacted by *NHCN* for this article—including Lowe's, a large Abitibi customer, and other retailers in Colorado, New England and California—was that Abitibi's paneling products retained a quality image in a market where plywood and other veneer lines were heavily promoted.

"The [Abitibi] name won't disappear," said Ralph Linehan, a buyer for the eight-unit Somerville Lumber in Massachusetts. "It's the oldest established name in New England."

But sales at the division last year fell 10.7 percent to $198.3 million (Canadian), and operating income for the division plummeted by 30 percent to $11.4 million (Canadian), according to Gordon Maw, Abitibi's vp-finance.

Building materials accounted for only 6 percent of the cor-

(Continued on page 92)

INDUSTRY UPDATE

Rickel lets go its vp-merchandising

SOUTH PLAINFIELD, N.J. — New Rickel president Robert Harrow has replaced the chain's vp-merchandising Lloyd Blank and vp-human resources Laura Tabakin. Tom Deutsch, merchandise manager-building materials, has also departed.

Blank was with the 51-unit chain 13 years, starting as a store salesman. Details on Tabakin's tenure were unknown. Her assistant Alan Hauser fills her post.

Salvatore Merlo was named merchandise manager for housewares/home furnishings. He spent 20 years with the Two Guys chain and most recently ran his own nine-store chain called WAGS.

Hedstrom celebrates its 75th year

GRAND MARAIS, Minn. — Despite a $1 million fire destroying the company's drying kiln and 300,000 board feet of lumber, Hedstrom Lumber still held a five-day open house celebrating the company's 75th anniversary.

Tours through Hedstrom's lumber mill went on Aug. 8 although the smell of burned timber was heavy next door. Wesley Hedstrom, president, said more than 1,000 people toured the company on Aug. 7 through Aug. 11, including town residents, contractor customers, officials from the U.S. Forest Service, the state department of natural resources and members of state trade associations.

Hedstrom said the fire apparently started around 10 p.m., Aug. 7. He said a spark from a welding torch in use on the kiln probably ignited the blaze; the kiln had a 13-million-board-foot annual capacity. Two weeks after the fire a new kiln and buildings had been ordered, he said.

Hedstrom Lumber had sales of $17 million in 1988, $1.25 million of which came from its single-unit retail operation here, northwest of Duluth, Minn.

Some closed Handy Dans occupied

HOUSTON, Texas — A regional sporting goods chain based here moved into some of the shuttered Handy Dan locations in and around this city. However, it's still not certain to what extent Handy Dan's parent, Channel Home Centers, has been able to sell off its southern stores and real estate.

Academy Sporting Goods, which operates a total of 28 stores, moved into some of the closed Handy Dan units in August. It is not completely clear what real estate company Channel dealt with to dispose of these closed stores.

Channel was negotiating a deal with Sun West Realty in Dallas in which Sun West would take the properties off of Channel's hands and then sell the leasing rights to various real estate brokers.

From its Whippany, N.J., headquarters, Channel would not comment on this development and Shearson Lehman Hutton, the New York investment banker which Channel hired to oversee sales of the southern units, did not return phone calls.

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Westlake operator names new president amidst rumors of sale

By an NHCN staff editor

MIAMI LAKES, Fla. — Fritz Braymen has been named president of the southeast division of Lone Star Hardware, the Miami-area operator of 19 Westlake Hardware stores.

But Braymen's role may be more of a salesman than a senior executive. According to sources in the investment banking community, Bear Stearns & Co. of New York has been brokering the sale of the Florida chain.

Braymen's appointment came just 90 days after his resignation as chief operating officer of the Lenexa, Kan.-based Westlake Hardware chain, which operates 74 stores and generated $142 million last year. Lone Star Hardware is an arm's length corporation set up by the Westlake family to franchise the Westlake Hardware name to 26 stores in Florida, Texas and New Mexico.

NHCN has learned that Bear Stearns employees Drew Field and Peggy Bertelson, both in the firm's corporate restructuring depart-

(Continued on page 94)

Hill-Behan chooses heir as ceo

By an NHCN staff editor

ST. LOUIS — Patrick Behan's job in the future will be to make changes before the world around him does.

The 45-year-old Behan, currently president and coo of Hill-Behan Lumber Co., was named chief executive officer of the family-owned chain last month. He assumed a title that was held by his father W. L. Behan Jr., who remains chairman of the company.

Hill-Behan is a highly diversified company. It operates 33 retail stores in the Midwest, as well as a sawmill, wood treating plants and professional home builder service centers in Missouri, Illinois, Mississippi and Louisiana. The company posted sales in excess of $90 million last year.

But Hill-Behan is examining its many operations, Behan said. Earlier this year, the company closed its 45-year-old prefabricated building parts and millwork division. While it still offers those products, they are sourced from outside the company.

Overall, Behan said there are many changes in the company's various sectors to keep up with: the changing mill and wood treatment technologies; increased competition in the retail sector; environmental restrictions on logging and

(Continued on page 94)

HWI signs on Dixieline Lumber

By an NHCN staff editor

SAN DIEGO — Hardware Wholesalers Inc. (HWI), continuing its West Coast expansion, has signed as a dealer-member the $160 million Dixieline Lumber chain, headquartered here.

The deal initially calls for the Fort Wayne, Ind.-based co-op to provide a small amount of building supply items to Dixieline's La Mesa store, one of 10 operated by the chain in southern California.

Walt Heise, Dixieline's vp-merchandising, said the products would all be direct-shipped from manufacturers, with HWI acting as purchasing agent. He said there was no timetable for folding in the remaining stores.

"We're testing the waters, trying to see if we can save on bulk-item purchases," he said.

Heise declined to say how much the company eventually

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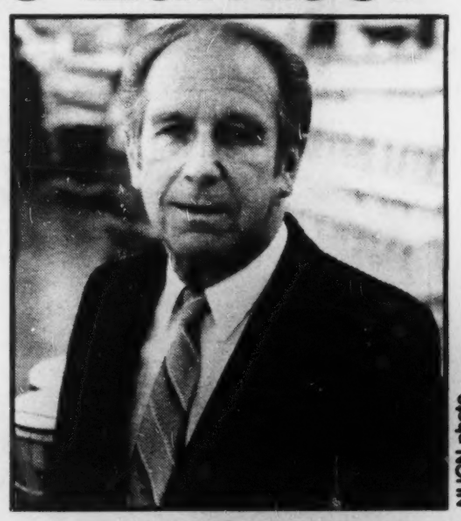

NHCN photo

Walt Heise

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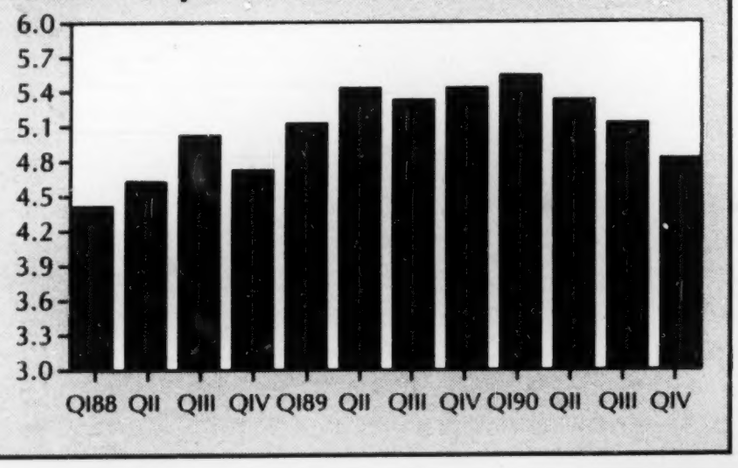

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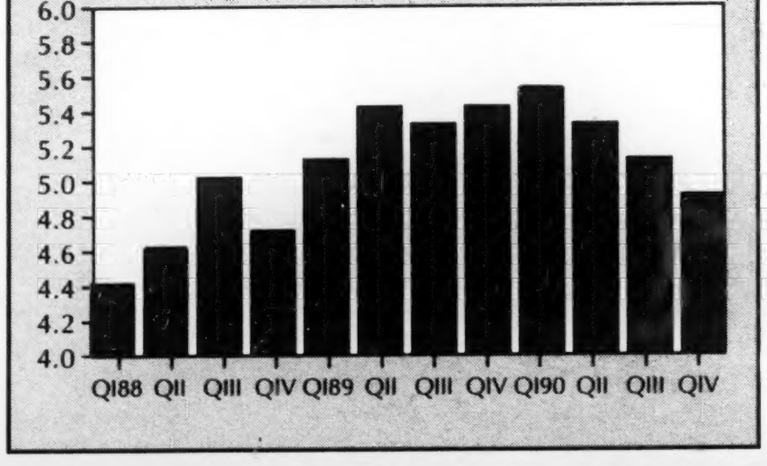

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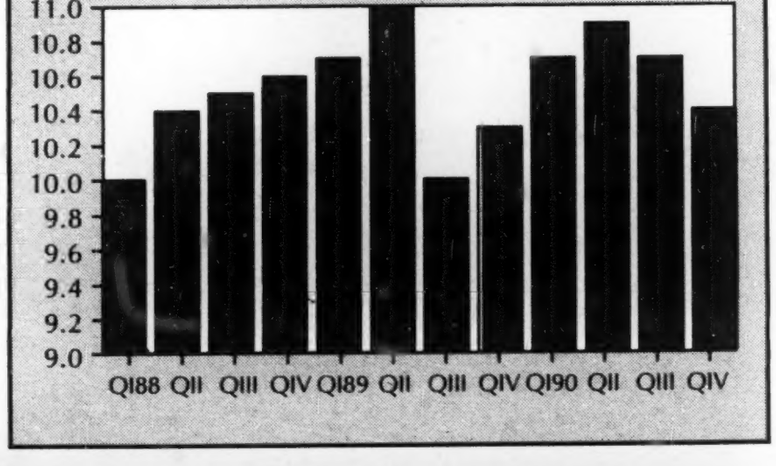

Mortgage rates enjoy decline; but another rise is expected

By Richard E. Mount
Special to NHCN

Housing markets and building materials retailers, distributors and producers have enjoyed the recent decline in mortgage rates to 9.7 percent in early August, from 11.1 percent in June. This reduction in borrowing costs has increased the number of housing starts in the last two months.

Rates may be near their trough though, and could begin to rise anew by the fourth quarter of this year, going as high as 10.9 percent by the middle of next year.

Richard E. Mount

For building materials retailers, this will pressure sales. We currently expect a rise in sales of 4.1 percent this year, due to softness in the first half.

The bright news during August was retail trade posting a gain of 0.9 percent from the prior month, and 6 percent from a year ago. Producer prices declined both in June and July. The big factors behind this decline were energy, down 0.3 percent in July, and autos due to end-of-year model discounts.

The economy appears to be picking up momentum. Housing starts rose 0.8 percent in July for the second consecutive month. Industrial production increased 0.2 percent in July, its first rise in three months. The trade deficit fell to its lowest level in four years.

The outlook for mortgage rates through the first half of 1990 is likely to revolve around inflation. Financial markets have been whipsawed so far in 1989. Food and energy costs soared in the opening months, pushing inflation higher. These markets then retreated, pulling inflation down.

For building material retailers, sales in 1989 have not been as robust as in 1988. Consumer spending in general has been soft. Higher interest rates will put additional pressure on housing in 1990. This does not suggest a downturn, but a period of slow growth.

Richard Mount is president and chief economist with Mount Economic Consulting.

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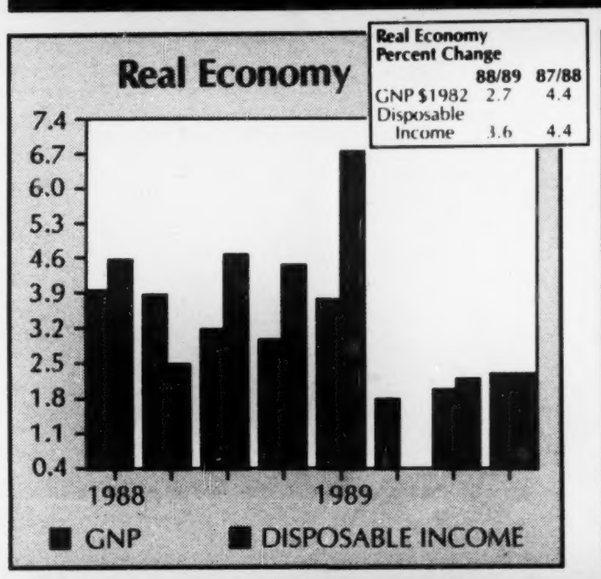

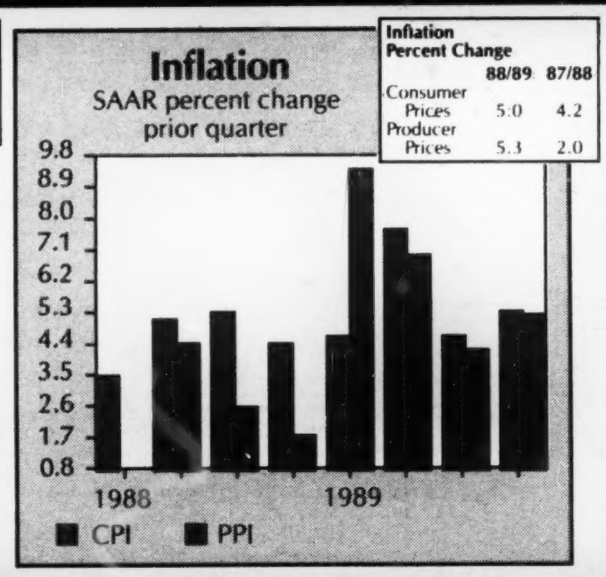

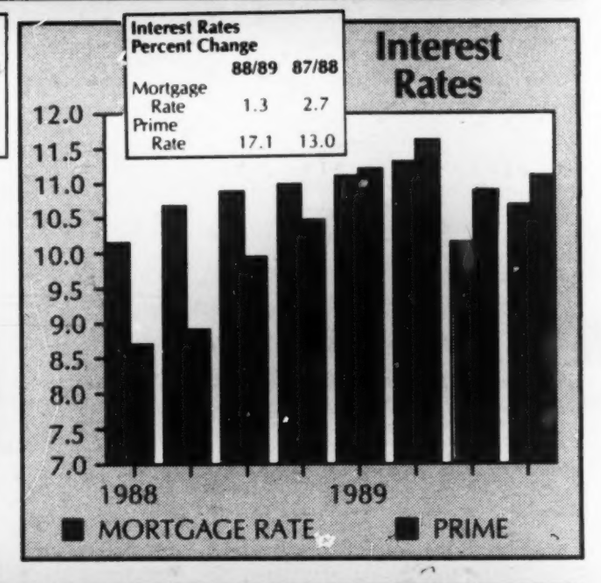

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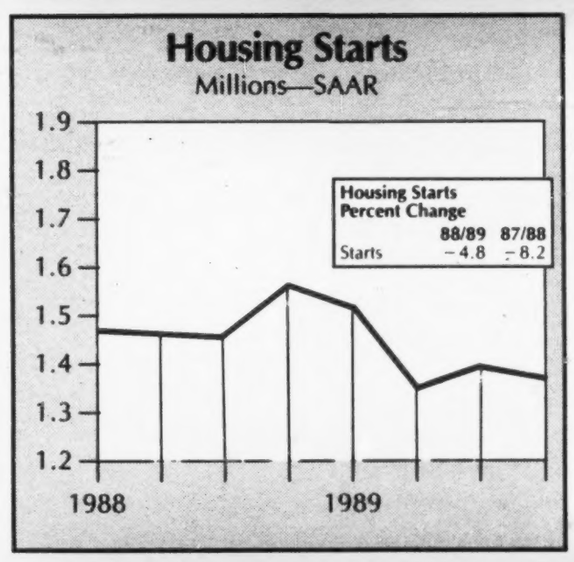

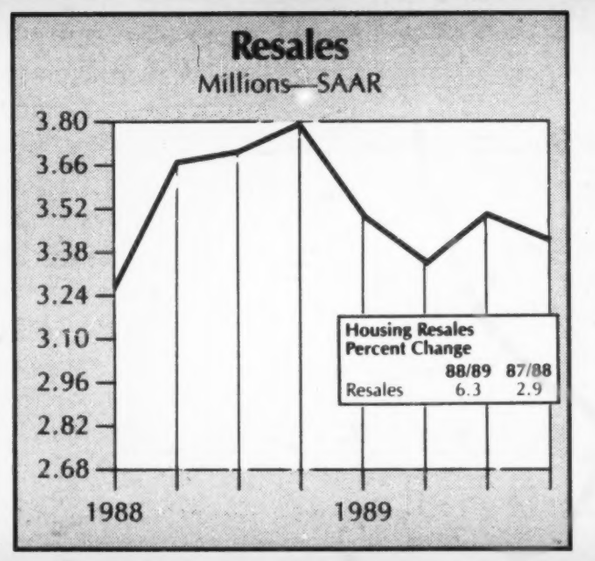

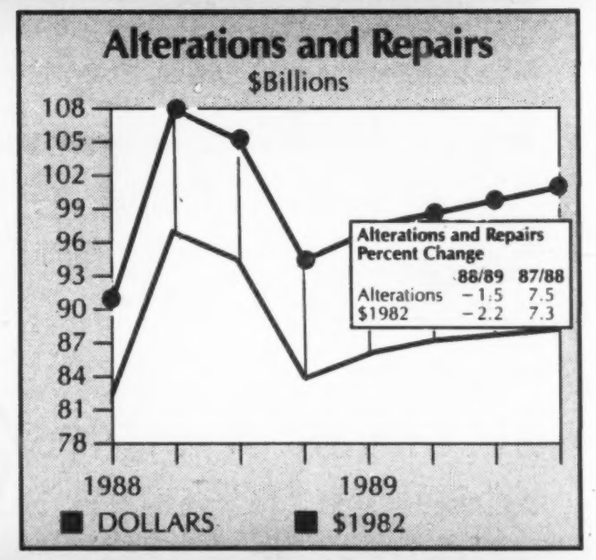

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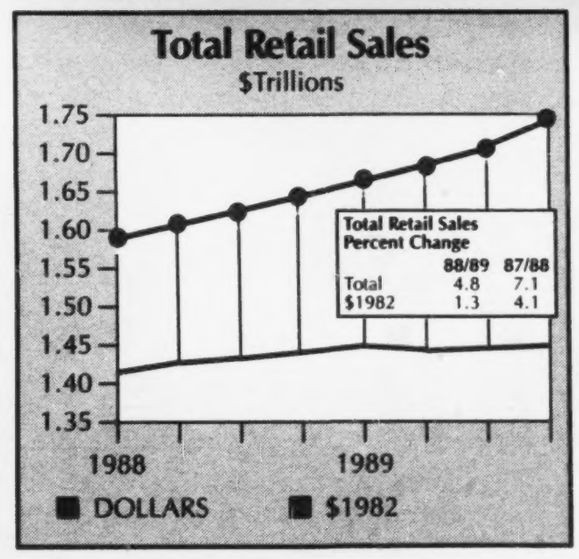

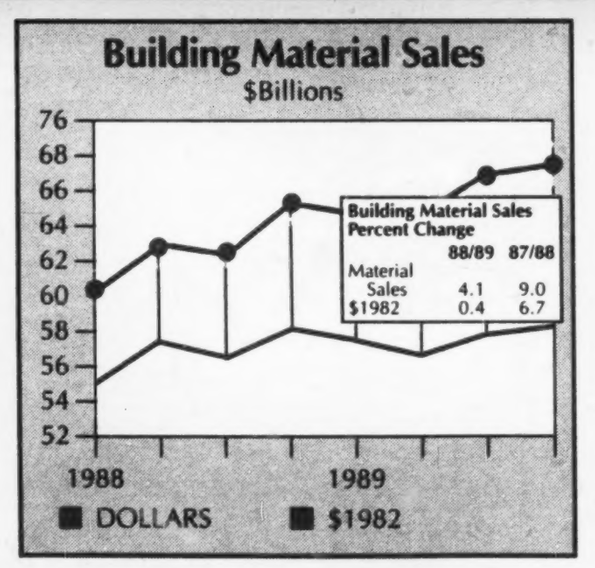

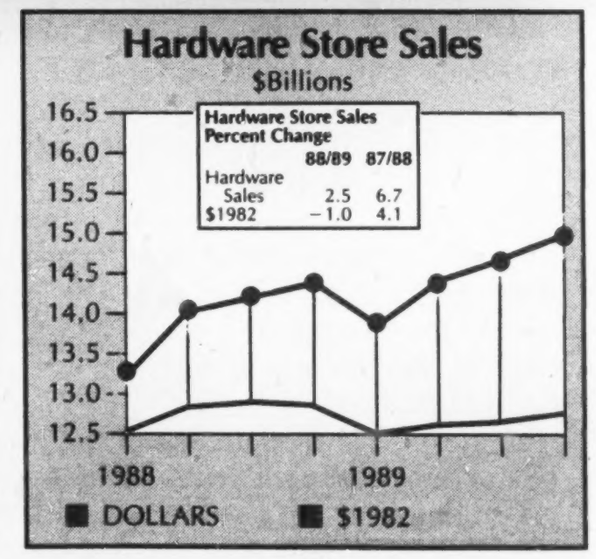

Data: Dept. of Commerce
Bureau of Labor Statistics
National Association of Realtors
Dept. of Housing and Urban Development

The Home Center Industry Outlook runs in two parts, one each month. The first part includes latest data on the General Economic Outlook; Residential Alterations & Repairs; and Retail Trade Activity. The second part includes latest data on regional building material and supply store sales.

SAAR—Seasonally Adjusted Annual Rate
p—projection
NHCN chart

Bar Code

(Continued from page 6)

pers, not in the back," said Lora Castellanos, UPC coordinator for the 105-store chain.

Home Depot plans to have each of its locations UPC-equipped by the end of January. Five months later, said Castellanos, those stores will be scanning cartons.

Builders Square, based in San Antonio, Texas, expects all 141 of its stores to employ UPC by the end of next year.

But Lowe's, the industry's largest chain, has no immediate plans to implement UPC scanning. Vaughn Hayes, vp-merchandising administration, said a committee was only recently formed to study the issue.

"Our attention has been focused more on EDI in the last year," he said. "It's a matter of resource allocation."

Meanwhile, retailers and vendors are conceding that however advanced bar coding becomes in the industry, there will always be items that will never be coded for checkout.

"For some things, it just doesn't make economic sense," said Willis of HomeClub, who included small pipe fittings, screws and concrete blocks as exceptions.

HomeClub, which estimates that 8 percent of its non-lumber products fall into this category, has used charts to deal with this. The charts have a picture of the item and a bar code alongside it. A clerk, in pricing the item, runs a scanner over the chart.

Finally, on the lumber front, another major supplier has joined the ranks of the few who bar code. As of this month, Georgia-Pacific has made available studs and plywood with UPC stickers.

The National Forest Products Association is expected to release recommendations at the end of September on bar coding. A source said those recommendations will be similar to those made by AHMA.

"They think, 'It's only the bar code,' " Kota said. They don't realize how much rides on how well that bar code scans at checkout.

A 10 percent error rate on scanning can translate into a 46 percent decline in reorders over the course of one year, based on a biweekly reorder schedule, Kota said.

Dorothy Brandes, K mart's coordinator for UPC, provided a cautionary tale of how vendors can be losing business through flawed codes.

K mart recently told a vendor of Christmas products that it didn't want to reorder because its records showed only half the vendor's merchandise sold last year.

At the vendor's urging, though, a K mart buyer checked UPC scanning error reports and discovered all the "unsold" merchandise on those lists. In fact, the vendor's entire line had sold out, but only half the sales had been "captured" on K mart's computer.

The vendor was told that if he could correct his scanning problems, not only would K mart renew the order, but would boost it by 50 percent.

Flaws detailed

To make the point more clearly during its presentation, K mart used a display of "good" and "bad" items to illustrate common problems.

For example, on one package of hinges, the product partially obscured the bar code. Another package avoided this problem, but only by making the code too small to scan.

Other common problems include:

- Not enough contrast. One can of paint used black bars on a silver field, but silver scans as black, so the scanner could not read it.
- Using orange, red or yellow as bars. Because of the optical frequency of the scanning beam, these colors scan as white, *i.e.*, not at all.
- Reversed labels. One product featured white bars on a dark-colored product. The scanner, designed to read black bars on a light background, read the dark "spaces," not the white bars.
- Wrong product identifier code. All general merchandise should begin with a zero as product identifier code. One package of light bulbs that featured a 25 cent coupon used a five as product identifier code. The scanner reads this as a deduct command (all scannable coupons use a five), therefore the scanner would read this and *deduct* the entire price of the product from the sale.
- Same code for different colors of the same product.

Rich Dipietro, manager of packaging development for Stanley Hardware, which had a few "bad" items represented in K mart's display, said, "The products we had a problem with are imported."

He added, however, that the hinge package on display was six or seven years old. "We corrected that problem three years ago," he said.

K mart

(Continued from page 6)

three or four scans, then type in the human-readable number," according to Alex Kota, POS coordination manager. "Often, however, they merely key in the price," he said. And that is a sale that doesn't exist, according to the automatic replenishment system.

Kota said manufacturers often put a lot of effort into the design and packaging of their product, and then pay little attention to the bar code.

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Vol. 15, No. 19 September 11, 1989

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